When Stars do not Align

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Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.
—Goethe

IN MARCH 1993, soldiers of the Canadian Airborne Regiment tortured and murdered a teenage Somali thief. Widespread distrust of a subsequent military investigation led the Crown to order a public inquiry by Justice Gilles Letourneau. As he began to reveal organizational malaise at the highest levels of the military-bureaucratic interface, the government terminated the inquiry six months short of its original mandate—an unprecedented action.

Much of the Canadian military believes that the story has not been effectively told, that responsibility has not been assigned, that leadership is lacking and any similar situations in the future would bring similar problems. Indeed, as Latourneau points out in the executive summary of his report, the type of closure people seek after such disturbing events is still missing.

"Due to the Government's decision to terminate the *Inquiry*, we were unable to reach the upper echelons with respect to the alleged issue of cover-up and the extent of their involvement in the post-deployment phase. . . . Evasion and deception, which in our view were apparent with many of the senior officers who testified before us, reveal much about the poor state of leadership in our armed forces and the careerist mentality that prevails at the Department of National Defence. These senior people come from an elite group in which our soldiers and Canadians generally are asked to place their trust and confidence."[1]

Even worse, since the release of the truncated report, poorly considered new-age programs attempted to improve soldier morale. But because many of these efforts have ignored the deficiencies noted by Letourneau, they have often *damaged* morale. Peter Senge warns, "Vision without an understanding of current reality will more likely foster cynicism than creativity."[2]

The US military, in a somewhat analogous situation in 1975, released the "Malone-Ulmer" report,

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a study by the US Army War College on "Military Professionalism." It was not flattering:

"Gentlemen, a scenario that was repeatedly described to us during our interviews for this study includes an ambitious, transitory commander, marginally skilled in the complexities of his duties, engulfed in producing statistical results, fearful of personal failure, too busy to talk with or listen to his subordinates, and determined to submit acceptably optimistic reports which reflect faultless completion of a variety of tasks at the expense of the sweat and frustrations of his subordinates."[3]

Why do these things happen? Officers receive commissions that clearly repose "special trust in their loyalty, courage and integrity." They are charged to "carefully and diligently discharge their duty," to keep their subordinates in "good order and discipline."[4] Often the tools are there to do the job, but leaders simply fail to execute this responsibility. Sometimes the political context compels them to ignore what would normally be the warning signs

that something is seriously amiss. Late in his life, General Howard K. Johnson, US Army chief of staff under President Lyndon Johnson, revisited an earlier turning point. He had decided that resignation over the conduct of the Vietnam War would be an empty, quickly forgotten act, for others would be brought in who were more amenable to the president. Better to serve on, faithful to the Army and the soldier, he thought, and improve the things he could. He reflected that there are sins of omission and sins of commission.

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"'I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, "You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door."' Then, added Johnson . . . 'I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am now going to my grave with that lapse in moral courage on my back.'"[5]

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Systems

William Donaldson has proposed that there are "six stars of effective organizations" which must be balanced for organizations to prosper: leadership, culture, strategic planning, organizational design, developing people and control methods.[7]

Leadership and Culture. Undoubtedly the most important aspect of the mix for an officer is leadership, along with its concomitant notions of responsibility and accountability. Though fundamental to military organizations, this leadership link to civilian culture has faded. Former Secretary of the US Navy James Webb argued that the greatest lingering effect of the Vietnam era on US society is that by default it brought about a new notion: "that military service during time of war is not a prerequisite for moral authority or even respect."[8] Canada and many other countries had begun to typify this truism long before Vietnam; indeed our prime minister elected in 1968 had studiously avoided service in World War II.

Nevertheless, whatever the political dynamic that directs the military, soldiers (like most intelligent people who toil in value-seeking organizations) expect their superiors to be accountable to them, as well as to their shareholders and any others. Accountability, after all, is a principal mechanism for ensuring conformity to standards of action.

In the military, as in any large public or private organization, those who exercise substantial power and discretionary authority must be answerable for all activities assigned or entrusted to them—in essence, for all activities for which they are responsible. Regardless of whether those actions are properly executed and lead to a successful result or are improperly carried out and produce injurious consequences, the leader is still responsible.

That this element of leadership should have such a profound effect on the organization's culture should not be surprising. The military, like many hierarchical organizations, tends to block negative information from reaching the decision makers at the top. Consider the examples of the cargo door problem on a DC-10, apparent after hundreds of people died in a crash near Paris, and the spectacular Challenger disaster in 1985.[9] Subsequent investigations of both accidents revealed other people in the organizations were aware of problems but were prevented from making their concerns known. These situations are analogous to the Canadian military experience in Somalia.

While these incidents typify how many large organizations respond to disaster, they starkly contrast, for instance, with incidents such as Boeing's reaction to the horrible crash of one of its (Japan Airlines) 747 aircraft. Boeing accepted responsibility for the faulty repair of a pressurized bulkhead, even though the National Traffic Safety Board investigation that revealed the fault also demonstrated that senior Boeing managers could not have known about it. Or take the resignation of Britain's Lord Carrington in the wake of the Argentinean invasion of the Falklands. Ministerial responsibility, in his case, demanded that he resign after the failure of the Foreign Office to predict the attack—despite other decisions by his own prime minister that impaired his ability to do so.

We must understand how such incidents connect the leader's responsibility and the culture of the organization. In many cases, such as the McDonnell Douglas and Morton Thiokol ones mentioned earlier, when a disaster occurs, senior leaders will proclaim their innocence and deny any moral responsibility. They often argue that they were not given information which could have warned them of impending problems and that they tried very hard to get such information. One should question, naturally, whether such protestations are appropriate. After all, most senior executives are well paid for their responsibilities. In particular, they receive bonuses or incentives when the corporation performs well. Since they benefit when the organization does well, how can they deny responsibility when things go wrong?

The problem, of course, is that leaders may not take the time to build the kind of learning organization that Senge talks about, in which shared vision is created by communication, encouraging personal vision and distinguishing positive from negative visions.[10] From Senge to Somalia, the moral of the story is simple: high-performance organizations talk internally. Vision is not about "top down" or "bottom up." It is about "sign on" and "acceptance." As retired General Gordon R. Sullivan opined, "in leading change, leaders must be extremely careful to spend a tremendous amount of time defining the intellectual change which must precede the physical. Without this work being done carefully and well, leaders become fad-surfers, [who] will never catch the big wave."[11]

To return to the DC-10 cargo door example (or, say, a bad decision by an officer on a dark and stormy night in a strange and distant land) senior leaders who claim to be personally innocent confuse their subordinates. Professional responsibility, after all, requires more than just doing one's best and trying to excuse oneself from moral responsibility if things go wrong. Even if leaders were not aware of what their subordinates were doing, and even if they had done everything they could to establish a culture in which they would be informed of subordinates' activities, they would not have automatically met their professional responsibilities. It would still be possible that they lacked the necessary ability to occupy a demanding leadership position. After all, organizations usually possess all the knowledge and ability necessary to avoid disaster. Leaders' claims that they are not responsible are curious precisely because leaders have the authority to demand such negative information, and it is certainly one of their obligations to know about these things.

Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox (*left*) and Elliot Richardson. In 1973, as attorney general under President Richard Nixon, Richardson resigned rather than carry out his orders to fire Cox, who had been investigating White House involvement in Watergate. A Harvard graduate and platoon leader during World War II, Richardson received a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts. He was secretary of defense before becoming attorney general.

Wide World Photos

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Strategic Planning and Organizational Design. The core competence of the US Army is to live, move and fight on the modern battlefield. The ancillary tasks that stem from this, of course, are legion, but important for most military organizations, a competence is exclusionary. It seeks to ask "what do we do that no one else does?" The corollary, of course, is "If there is some other organization that does it, why do we exist?" In other words, armies that exist to do peacekeeping, firefighting, flood relief or something else to justify their budgets, won't be around for very long—at least as armies. To paraphrase Napoleon, you will have an Army, so it is generally preferable that it be your own.

People want to "pledge allegiance to something," for the "desire to belong is a foundation value, underlying all others."[12] Military leaders must design organizations that can satisfy individual needs to belong and operationalize strategic intent. Employees in companies that are managed for longevity perceive themselves as part of a larger, cohesive

whole—a work community. This is certainly true of most military organizations.

Nevertheless, no Western military has escaped downsizing in recent years. But combined with ambiguous strategic leadership and all-too-frequent non-core activities (from peacekeeping or peace-enforcement activities in Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, to mixed-gender training of recruits, to the uneven application of responsibility), the trickle of departing specialists has, in the past two or three years, become a flood.

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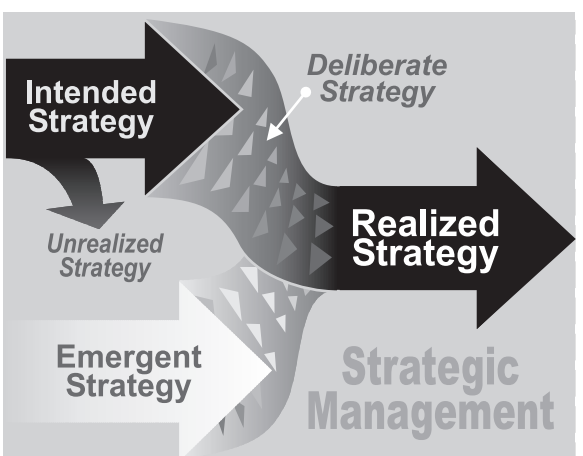
Part of this exodus has to do with the contemporary geostrategic confusion. "How does what I am doing," the young soldier may ask, "add value to the situation in which I find myself?" But increasingly, the uncertainty is directed at senior military leadership, and it takes another form: "I'll do this fourth deployment in three years, but tell me how it is part of a larger strategic context and a vision of a better future."

Judging from exit interviews and the Army's failure last year to achieve its recruiting goals, senior military leaders are apparently not answering these questions satisfactorily. Moreover, in an age of media convergence, when the actions of a 19-year-old soldier may be carried live on CNN, notions of "freedom of action" and "empowerment" take on restrictive meanings that would have been senseless only 10 years ago. If enthusiasm is at least as important as experience in a military context, these developments are very troubling indeed.



Some of the seeds of the discontent that many soldiers feel were sown by the US services themselves as they sought, over the past 20 years or so, to institutionalize the "Top Gun" mentality in training. Borrowed from the Navy's Fighter Weapons School, the Army's Combat Training Centers and the Air Force's Nellis Air Force Base provide the best training in the world. After 20 years, the mental agility and initiative that made for remarkable success in the Gulf War have also left a mentality of questioning a superior's orders at every level in the organization to better understand and execute the intent.

While these requests for clarification enable tremendous success when unity of command is strong, they also lead to disillusionment and high release rates when the commander's strategic intent is unclear. Young US soldiers really will announce that "the emperor has no clothes."

The real threat that such high release rates pose, however, has much to do with the formulation of strategy and the fact that the services are losing so many midcareer officers. This loss is significant because, in the military context, the organizational culture is not an element of the system, it *is* the system. Henry Mintzberg says of organizations, "at the *individual* level, leaders mentor, coach and motivate; at the *group* level, they build teams and resolve conflicts; at the *organizational* level, leaders build culture."[13] But the military, unlike many organizations, has a built-in culture that needs little stewardship. General Sullivan once quipped, "the Army was an institution built by geniuses to be run by idiots." It needs good, stable stewardship of its day-to-day life, not revolutionary cultural change, if it is to survive with its core competence intact.

Military cultural strength depends on redundancy. A military hierarchy is designed to absorb casualties in war, and it lends enormous brain power in situations short of war. The large cohort of midcareer officers in staff positions forms the real heart of the organization.

For creating strategy, this group of experienced, educated, connected and intellectually challenging officers who represent the "emergent strategy" in the adjacent diagram. The top-down "intended and deliberate" strategies, which are the products of national-level direction, are significantly affected by

this group of "reality checkers," through a process that is reminiscent of another Arie de Geus notion, that "nobody knows as much as all of us." It is the loss of this "cultural middle" that represents the most serious contemporary challenge to militaries in general, and to the US Armed Forces in particular.

Developing People and Control Methods. Western military circles debate whether there has been a "revolution in military affairs." It is beyond question that there has been a revolution in business affairs, but most military leaders have not converted the "box" lesson of Jack Welch, or the "high expectations" of George Fisher into realizable goals.

Recognizing this lag, the US Congress has mandated that regardless of operational and other commitments, a large amount of money and effort be devoted to *experimentation*. This effort to discover leap-ahead technologies or methods aims to revolutionize future warfare, much as the stirrup and machinegun did in their day.

In an ironic twist, it has been more than 20 years since the US military was displaced by business as the leader in defining, developing and fielding emerging technologies. In this information age, it is likely that the lead enjoyed by industry will continue. The new Army takes many of its large-scale logistics ideas from Wal-Mart and Fedex; previously industry took them from the Army.

Despite this technological preoccupation, however, people will provide the continuity essential for success. This human continuity bears the closest examination in the search for the next "stirrup," because the critical generation of officers is abandoning the military in large numbers. The spirit of constructive internal criticism has been the real contemporary competitive advantage of the US military, not all the gadgetry, however impressive. If this mentality can be maintained, the advantage will endure, but many contemporary pressures conspire to upset the balance.

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Shared culture in a military context comes easily because a highly structured socialization process and an unwritten code of ethics form the basis of behavior. As Sullivan points out, an enduring set of values allows a soldier to do the right thing and not fixate on the merely legal thing. Values shape the institution, not just the individual. Organizations with strong values are successful over time: "Leadership must focus on values because shared values express the essence of an organization . . . the things which will not change. With values as the unifying, guiding rubric, effective leadership is not about controlling from the top, but rather about unleashing the power of people. Team building must start as a process of *distributing* leadership."[14]

Maintaining an inclusive, team-based environment for soldiers is a great military challenge. Nevertheless, hope for most Western military organizations rests on this cohesive dynamic—despite tragic events such as that in Somalia.

Much management theory, especially as it relates to organizational design, was originally based on military examples. It would do us all well in any military to remember, as businesses continue to discover in their efforts to understand many contemporary emerging notions of human capital, personal strengths, interpersonal skills and so on, what one US Army general observed: "people are not *in* the Army, they *are* the Army."[15] ***MR***

NOTES

1. Gilles Letourneau, Executive Summary to the *Report of the Public Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia*, 1996.
2. Peter Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations." *Sloan Management Review* (Fall 1990), 9.
3. Preamble to the Executive Summary of the *Study on Military Professionalism*, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1970.
4. *Queen's Commissioning Scroll.* Similar wording is used for the commissions of most Western nations.
5. Lewis Sorley, *To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press 1998), 31.
6. Peter Drucker, "Not Enough Generals Were Killed," *Forbes ASAP* (8 April 1996), 104.
7. William Donaldson, *The Six Stars*. Course material used at the Graduate School of Management, The College of William and Mary. One of Donaldson's models describes six stars that must be in alignment for an organization to prosper. They are leadership, culture, organizational design, strategic planning, control methods and developing people. "Stars," of course, are a compelling metaphor in a military environment.
8. James Webb, *Military Leadership in a Changing Society*, Naval War College Conference on Ethics, Newport, RI, 1998, 31.
9. John Bishop, "The Moral Responsibility of Corporate Executives for Disasters," *Journal of Business Ethics,* 1991, 377-83.
10. Senge, 14.
11. Gordon R. Sullivan, *Hope is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn From America's Army* (New York: Random House, 1996), 43.
12. Tom Stewart, "Company Values That Add Value," *Fortune* (8 July 1996), 147.
13. Henry Mintzberg, "Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals," *Harvard Business Review* (Nov-Dec 1998), 145.
14. Sullivan, 119.
15. Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 146.

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